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ABSTRACT

A role-playing procedure for elicitation of speech acts was designed to study aspects of the communicative competence of second language learners, namely, their language variation with respect to deference when the age and sex of the addressee are systematically manipulated. Sixteen Spanish-speaking adult learners of English as a second language participated in the study. The requests and suggestions evoked in the role-playing situations, in both the native and target languages, were rated by judges for deference. The resulting scores were analyzed to yield the effects of the sex of speaker and the age and sex of addressee on the level of deference conveyed in the utterances. It was found that in the requests, age was a significant factor in both languages, but sex of speaker and addressee were significant only in Spanish. For the suggestions, significant age and sex factors appeared only in the English corpus, while there were none in the Spanish one. The results are interpreted with attention to the notions of transfer of pragmatic strategies and the concurrent reformulation of deference requirements for the second language. (Author/AMH)

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Getting Your Speech Act Together:

The Pragmatic Ability of Second Language Learners[1]

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Introduction

Recently, the notion of communicative competence has been given a great deal of attention by language teachers, as a goal for their students, and by researchers in language acquisition, as an object of inquiry. Communicative competence encompasses the ability to produce and comprehend strings of sounds which combine to create meaningful utterances, the appropriate use of these utterances in context, and the organization of sequences of utterances in conversation.

On the one hand, the grammar of individual sentences uttered by second language learners has been studied extensively, often to determine elements of interference from the native language, to identify features of interlanguage which do not appear to be attributable to interference, to trace the grammatical development of the learner, and to recognize language learning strategies.

On the other hand, the use of individual utterances for specific conversational functions can also be studied, as can the organization of sequences of learner utterances as they function with each other in conversation. Such work on the discourse of L2 learners has been reported by Hatch (1978) and Peck (1978) and others.

In this study, the focus is on the pragmatic ability of the learner. We are interested in utterances as they are used to communicate specific intentions, and conversely, how learners seem to interpret the intentions which utterances convey. Pragmatics is the study of speech acts, and the speech acts selected for this study are the request, and the suggestion.

It seems clear that the choice of language used to perform such speech acts, and indeed, any speech act, varies as a function of a number of social variables. For requesting and suggesting, these variables include: a) characteristics of the speaker and hearer, such as age, sex, race, and social

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Los Angeles Second Language Research Forum on October 7, 1978. I am indebted to Bruce Fraser for his very helpful comments and criticism.

status; b) the nature of the action directed by the speaker; c) the speaker's need for this action to be performed; d) the degree of imposition it places on the hearer; and e) characteristics of the conversational setting, such as the degree of formality associated with it. It is assumed that all of these variables interact with each other in a fairly complicated system, but a system nonetheless, the workings of which are reflected in the linguistic behavior of speakers. Interest in this system prompted the following question: when L2 learners perform the speech acts to request and to suggest, how does their language vary as a function of the age and sex of the addressee, and of the sex of the speaker?

One way of looking at variation evidenced in directives such as requesting and suggesting is to look at the syntactic form. Another way is to look at the degree of deference conveyed in the utterance. The term deference is taken to mean the symbolic appreciation of the hearer by the speaker, following Fraser (1977). As the speaker increases the level of deference conveyed, he does so by choosing a language form which confers positive values such as status and power on the hearer.

For example, the following requests for the same action convey decreasing levels of deference:

1. Could I ask you to be a little more quiet?

2. Please be quiet.

3. Shut up.

The reader will doubtless agree that there are numerous other ways of asking someone to make less noise, each with its own relative level of deference.

Returning now to the question of how language varies, we are interested in the variation in the degree of deference communicated in the speech acts under investigation. Age and sex were chosen as the independent variables because they are elements of status, and status and familiarity are seen as the most important addressee factors in setting requirements of deference (c.f. Goody, 1978).

The specific hypotheses addressed in this study are as follows:

1. Utterances used to request convey more deference than utterances used to suggest.

Requests and suggestions differ from one another in the following way: They are both speech acts in which the speaker directs the addressee to perform some action. However, in a request, it is the speaker who desires the action to be carried out, whereas in a suggestion, the speaker asks the hearer to take some action which the speaker believes will benefit the hearer, even one that the speaker should desire (unless, of course, some sarcasm, trick, or maliciousness is involved). Since the deference conveyed in the directive has, in part, the purpose of convincing the hearer to com-

ply, then it is arguable that a lesser degree of deference is generally necessary in suggestions, where the speaker has less investment than the hearer in the possible outcome.

2. Speakers are more deferent to addressees older than themselves.

It is generally accepted that most societies confer status on older persons. It is reported anecdotally by many Latin American bilinguals that this is an even stronger element in Latin American culture than of North American "Anglo" culture. It is expected, then, that the Latin American subjects will show greater deference toward older addressees, even when speaking English, the language with which they are less familiar.

3. Speakers are more deferent to addressees of the opposite sex than to addressees of their own sex.

Although studies have shown that more status and power are generally conferred on men than on women (Thorne and Henley, 1975), it is not expected that speakers of both sexes will show more deference to male addressees, simply because they are male.

Rather, it is argued that a stronger factor in a conversation between a male and a female is the existence of more social distance and less familiarity between speakers than in a same-sex dyad. This distance allows the male to confer sufficient status on a female addressee so as to be more deferential to her than to another male. Again, the formality between unfamiliar interlocutors of different sexes may be even greater for Latin Americans than for North Americans, lending support to the expectation that the utterances of the Latin American subjects of the present study will follow such a pattern.

Methodology

The subjects were eight male and eight female adult native Spanish speaking students of English as a Second Language at the Boston University Center for English Language and Orientation Program. They were in intermediate to advanced level classes.

Each subject was asked by a team of a male and a female experimenter working together to role play himself or herself in situations which required him or her to make four requests and four suggestions in English. Each situation was paired with one of the four two-level variables of age and sex of addressee: older female (FO), older male (MO), younger female (FY) and younger male (MY). The experimenters took the roles of the addressees of their own sexes. Familiarity was held constant since the subjects were informed that all addressees were strangers. This procedure was then repeated in Spanish, and the entire session was audio tape recorded and transcribed. Approximately one week later, the procedure was repeated with the same subject, first in English and then in Spanish, but with one of the two addressee variables for each situation systematically changed to its opposite. Thus, if at Time 1 the addressee in a given situation was MO, at Time 2 it was FO or MY.

One of the situations designed to elicit a request is given in Example 1.

Example 1 Request: Package Situation

> You are expecting a package to be delivered to your apartment. It is a birthday present you bought for your mother. She is coming to visit you tomorrow, which is her birthday, and you want very much to give her the present exactly on her birthday. You have been at home waiting for the package to arrive, but now you must leave for school, so you need someone else to accept it for you. You've noticed that there is usually someone at home in the apartment below yours. You go downstairs and ring the bell. A (middle aged/teenaged) (man/woman/boy/girl) opens the door. Imagine that E. is that ____. Ask (him/her) to receive the package for you.

Example 2 shows one of the situations designed to elicit a suggestion. The addressee variable was manipulated in the same way as in the request example.

Example 2 Suggestion: Lost Jacket Situation

> Experimenter 1: You are walking along the street on your way to class. A stranger approaches you, and speaks to you. (He/she) is a (12 year old/middle aged) (man/boy/woman/girl). Imagine that E. is that _____.
>
> Experimenter 2: Excuse me. I was just passing by and saw this jacket lying on the sidewalk. I don't know who it belongs to, but I'm sure they'll want to get it back. I don't know what to do with it.
>
> Experimenter 1: Make a suggestion as to what (he/she) should do.

To obtain a rating of the degree of deference for each utterance, the transcribed utterances were presented to judges. The judges were instructed to rate each utterance on a 5 point scale, where a rating of 1 meant barely deferent, 2 somewhat deferent, 3 fairly deferent, 4 very deferent, and 5 extremely deferent. The English utterances were rated by native speakers of English and the Spanish utterances by native Spanish speakers.

However, the English data were utterances produced by learners. In order to know how they varied their strategies, we have to be aware of the possible differences between what native speakers perceived in learner utterances, and what the learners intended. This difference might lead to the identification of what would appear to be a pragmatic "error". That is, the

learner might in some instances use language in which he intends to be very deferential, but if the strategy does not match the way in which a native speaker would be deferential, the utterance might be interpreted as not at all deferent by a native speaker. Or, conversely, the learner could conceivably intend not to show much deference toward some addressee, but his estimation of the language required in that context might lead him to make the "error" of sounding, to a native speaker, much more deferential than he intended.

To explore the questions about the nature of the learners' pragmatic variation, it became apparent that the way in which learners perceive deference in their own utterances would be important if we were to understand the way they perceived varied levels of deference in directives uttered in English. If the learners rated the utterances for deference in the same way as native speakers did, that as well would be worth knowing.

Therefore, ten of the original learner subjects, in addition to the ten English speakers, were asked to rate the English utterances, and the same ten rated the Spanish utterances.[2]

Data Analysis

Each English utterance was assigned two scores, and each Spanish utterance one. These were the means of the ten scores assigned by each of the three groups of judges: English, English-learner, and Spanish. These 762 scores, the dependent measures, were analyzed in a three-way analysis of variance with repeated measures, where sex of the speaker was a between subject factor and age and sex of addressee were within subject factors. The same design was repeated for the three categories of judgments, for requests and suggestions, and for Time 1, Time 2, and a combination of the two times which consisted of the means of the corresponding scores from T1 and T2.

Results

The results are summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Requests Compared to Suggestions

Judgment Group				
1) Native English speakers	R > S,	T=5.2733	***	p < .001
2) Learners	R > S,	T=4.259	***	p < .001
3) Native Spanish Speakers	R > S,	T=4.464	***	p < .001

2. I am grateful to Kurt Kohn for suggesting the need for this rating.

First, requests were indeed found to be judged as more deferent than suggestions. According to the ratings of all three groups of judges, with $p < .001$, this finding supports the first hypothesis that the two directives differ from one another, at least with respect to the degree of deference required in the performance of the speech acts.

Table 2

Effects

Type of Directive	Judgment Group	Combined Time 1 and Time 2 Effects
Request	1) Native English	Age: F=6.366 *, p=.025, O > Y
	2) Learner	Age: F=6.159 *, p=.027, O > Y
	3) Spanish	Age: F=21.932 ***, p < .001, O > Y
		Sex x Sex of addressee: F=.14.175 **, p=.003, F speakers, M > F, M speakers, F > M.
Suggestions	1) Native English	Sex x Age of addressee: F=.115, approaching significance with p=.071, F speakers, O > Y, M speakers Y > O.
	2) Learner	Sex of addressee x Age of addressee: F=4.869 *, p=.045, F addressees, O > Y, M addressees, Y > O.
	3. Spanish	No significant effects.

The second hypothesis was that speakers are more deferent to older addressees. Native and learner judges found greater deference in English requests addressed to older addressees than to younger ones, at the .025 and .027 levels of significance, respectively. In the Spanish corpus, there is an even greater effect for age, with $p < .001$.

In the suggestions, there was no main effect for age of addressee. However, in the learner judgments of the English utterances, there was a curious interaction between age of addressee and sex of addressee, at the .045 significance level. Across both sexes of speakers, when the addressee was male, younger addressees were seen as receiving more deference than older ones, and when the addressee was female, older addressees received more deference. There were no significant effects in the Spanish suggestions.

The third hypothesis was that speakers would show more deference to addressees of the opposite sex than to those of the same sex. No such effect was found in the judgments of group 1, the native English speakers, or for group 2, the learners. Both groups, then were in agreement that there was no difference between the two sex factors. However, in the Spanish requests, at the .003 level of significance, it was found that males were more deferent

to females, and females more deferent to males.

Discussion

This result, with reference to the third hypothesis, suggests that a sociolinguistic feature of Spanish, the native language, was not transferred to English, to a statistically significant extent. This may imply that the learners in this study, at least, are not completely relying on the pragmatic rules of the native language regarding the relationship between the sexes of the speaker and addressee, but have a different sense of when to be deferent when speaking English.

In contrast, the age factor was clearly operative in the requests of both languages. The learners themselves agreed with the native speakers in judging the English requests to be more deferent when the addressee was older, just as Spanish requests showed more deference to older addressees. Perhaps, then, for this group of learners, the social convention of verbally showing respect for one's elders remains stable in the second language and culture, whereas the one which deals with the relative status of the sexes is seen as different in the United States and when speaking English.

While the native and learner groups agree when judging the English requests, their judgments about the suggestions do not match each other's. In addition, the results from both groups are puzzling . If all speakers showed greater deference to older addressees when making requests, why, according to native judgments, do female speakers do so to a much greater extent than do males when making suggestions? Furthermore, why, as seen by the learner judges, would older addressees receive more deferent language if they are female, but less than the younger ones if they are male? No plausible explanation can be offered here. It should be noted, too, that there were no significant age or sex effects in the Spanish suggestions. Thus, this result again suggests that the subjects are not simply transferring pragmatic strategies from Spanish.

Overall, the suggestions were judged as less deferent than the requests. Perhaps, then, when the directive requires less deference, the age and sex factors do not play such a great role in determining the variation of the type of language used to perform the directive as they do for one requiring more deference. However, when speaking the less familiar language, the estimation of the requirements for deference may be less clear than in the native language, resulting in less consistent attention to the addressee variants. It is conceivable that the learners' ratings of their own utterances reflect this inconsistency and lack of certainty, and therefore the analysis of the two sets of ratings reveal different effects.
The above is, of course, a tentative and highly speculative interpretation of the patterns which emerged in the English suggestions of this experiment. Further study is necessary to resolve these questions.

Other studies which have looked at deference in requests have relied for the most part on the importance of the linguistic form of the request sentence. For example, Fraser (1977) asked judges to rate for deference forms used for requesting with no context supplied in the sentences. The forms rated were " would you ____", "could you _____", "do _____", etc.

Walters (1978) had judges rate sentences collected from bilingual children, to derive a hierarchy of least deferent to most deferent forms.

However, in this study, the ratings of deference were assigned to longer utterances. Subjects' responses in the role-playing situations had the following general pattern: Conversational opening + request or question + justification. Here is an example from the corpus:

(#122a) Excuse me, miss, could you change the seats with this child, because he's very interested in the game, and he can't see with you in front?

There are many variations on this pattern, with justifications sometimes preceding the request, sometimes both preceding and following a request, and sometimes appearing to replace a direct request. In addition, there were offers to repay the favor should the request be granted. It seems probable that these elements of the request episode all contribute with various relative weights to the degree of deference conveyed, and therefore to the score assigned to it. Although it has been shown that judges can distinguish between the degrees of deference conveyed by the syntactic form of a request sentence or question alone, it is doubtful here that the syntactic form, or the modal used, was the most crucial factor.

In the present corpus, the most frequent form for request sentences in English is "can you ____", with "could you ____" the second most frequent. However, both of these forms are used to all four categories of addressee with about equal frequency. It does not appear that the differences, among these modals and other syntactic forms, account for the effects found for the age and sex variables. Likewise, podría, the most frequently used Spanish form, was used across all addressee conditions. So, according to this analysis, it seems that the modal or the syntactic form of the request sentence nested in the larger utterance plays only a partial role in the way deference is conveyed in language.

A closer analysis of the language used by the speakers is now necessary to discover the relationship between the language itself and the deference scores. In real situations, the speaker often utters more than one sentence in making a request, and it may be expected that the choice of conversational opening, and the type and length of justification, will interact with the request sentence to produce the assigned level of deference for a given utterance, and at the same time, show more clearly that hearers respond to a great deal more than the syntax of the request sentence alone.

If we wish to know more about the sociolinguistic system for directives, and especially more about the learner's acquaintance with this system, many more areas of research lie open to us. The "base-line" data in this study are the native language corpus -- Spanish. English data must be collected from English native speakers to shed some light on the conventions that learners of English are expected to acquire. We need to gain a sense of the development of pragmatic ability as facility in the second language increases. We need to know more about the influences of other contextual factors. In addition, other means of collecting data must be developed which more closely approximate real-life language use.

Further knowledge about pragmatics will be especially fruitful for those of us concerned with language teaching and language assessment. Curricula which concentrate on the appropriate use of language to perform directives and other speech acts in a variety of settings will provide a broader framework for further language acquisition, and greatly enhance the learner's ability to become part of the new linguistic community. Assessment techniques which emphasize the evaluation of a speaker's ability to vary language for the purpose of communicating similar information in different social contexts, may provide us with better descriptions of speakers' linguistic capabilities than we have been able to produce to date.

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